

## CALVIN AT GENEVA AND STRASBURG.

## III.

By Prof. Henry E. Dosker, D.D.

Geneva occupied an ideal strategic position for the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Located at the end of Lake Lemman, at the mouth of the Rhone, where the Alps touch the Jura, where Italy and Germany and France touch hands, its position was ideal for the furtherance of the great cause, which then swayed the hearts and aroused the passions of all men. Its history reaches back into the dim Roman past, and beyond. From the Franks it passed to the Burgundians and thence to the German Empire. The rapacity of the neighboring barons drove its citizens into the arms of the dukes of Savoy, who made it one their residences and strongholds. Under their protection, its episcopal see became hopelessly corrupt.

In 1526 the Genevese rebelled against the Savoyese and, under the leadership of Brethelier, threw off the galling yoke. The corrupt bishops ruled the city for a while as nominal lords. But the ferment of the Reformation touched Geneva. Wonderful news came from Zurich and Berne, from Germany and France. The air became electric and, when in 1532, Farel, the disciple of Lefevre, reached the city from the Waldensian valleys, the inevitable occurred. Viret soon joined him, the partisans of the new movement grew in numbers, and a strong reformatory nucleus was created. The infuriated clergy made frantic efforts to maintain themselves, but when they went to the extreme of attempting to poison the reformers (Viret suffered from this cause to the day of his death), their doom was sealed, and they were formally expelled from the city, by a decree of the Great Council, August 26, 1535. "The papal religion was abolished and the Reformed religion founded on the Gospel, was established."

Farel and Viret became the recognized spiritual leaders. But what a task was theirs! Bonnivard, an old Genevan citizen, then living at Berne, had prophesied long before: "You hated the priests for being a great deal too much like yourselves, you will hate the preachers for being dead unlike yourselves. You will not endure the preachers any more than you now endure the priests, and you will send them off with no other wages for their work than good blows, with a cudgel." He was a true prophet and he knew his people.

Look for a moment at the moral problem, which confronted the Reformation at Geneva. Well chosen in the light of history, was the early motto of Geneva—"Post tenebras lux." After the darkness comes the light.

The flames of hell flared higher in Geneva than in any other cities in Europe of its size at that time. Stahelin and Henry draw a picture, on absolutely reliable authority which we dare not copy. The Libertines set the pace of the moral life of Geneva. They were divided into spiritual and political Libertines. A thin veneer of religion, on the part of the former, covered all manner of hideousness. They discarded faith in the devil, they denied both the liberty and immortality of the soul. Every human act, because not free but necessary, was alike without merit or guilt. Sin therefore had no existence. Free love was

openly advocated. Unmentionable sins were committed, the city was filled with nightly brawls, in which men and women reeled in drunken shame along the streets. Typical of the morality of the Genevese are the trials and execution of the so-called Infectionists, who during the plague deliberately infected every house in the city, to decimate its inhabitants and to appropriate their possessions. Frightfully punished as was the crime, it was repeated in 1520, 1545 and 1568.

Into this inferno the high principled Calvin was hurled! Farel and Viret felt themselves unequal to the task which confronted them, and they were almost in despair. Suddenly they were informed by du Tillet, who was one of the French refugees in the city, of the presence of Calvin, the author of the "Institutes." It seemed God's voice to Farel. He hastened to Calvin's lodgings and begged him to stay. Calvin refused. Farel insisted and finally threatened him with the curse of God, if he dared to set aside this divine call. With a shudder Calvin hesitatingly surrendered and remained.

At first he simply expounded the Scriptures and received only a nominal compensation. In all the records of that early day he is only referred to as "The Frenchman." The disputation at Lausanne, in September, 1536, however, revealed his powers and when, a month later, he returned to Geneva, he was formally elected pastor and installed at St. Peter's. His eagle glance at once grasped the situation and, with iron determination, he began to enforce his motto—"Liberty but order." A brief Confession of Faith was composed by the pastors and accepted by the people and Calvin began to insist on church discipline. The enemy was dazed by the courage of the attempt, and the grossest sins of the city were suppressed or driven from the public gaze.

But Geneva was not converted, the fires burrowed under ground and were fed by a passionate hatred of the man, whose preservation, amid untold dangers, from physical harm, during all the years of his ministry of strife, is little less than miraculous. The Genevese soon tired of the Reformation, they looked longingly at their licentious past. The crisis came when the pastors refused to follow the lead of Berne, in the matter of the observance of the Lord's Supper, even in the face of the decision of the Synod of Lausanne, March, 1538. The people, led by the Libertines, rose en masse and the Council, enraged by the refusal of the pastors to obey their decrees, definitely accepted the Bernese rite and banished the Reformers. Calvin accepted the decision with gratitude to God, his conscience was clear, the prophecy of Bonnivard was fulfilled, and he left Geneva, expecting never to return.

After some wandering he settled at Strasburg in September, 1538, where he was received with open arms. The French refugees immediately accepted him as their pastor and here, in a smaller circle, he began to weave again the fabric, which had been broken at Geneva. At Strasburg he labored with Bucer and Capito, celebrated names in the history of the Reformation. There Calvin's horizon broadened and he was brought in immediate contact with the great leaders of the movement. He taught in the University and his phenomenal powers began to reach their full maturity.

From Strasburg he was sent to attend the Diets of